Smithsonian Folkways Recordings: A Question of Balance

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How does a small record label, operating within a large museum setting, balance its educational mission's imperatives against economic need, a pair of priorities inherently in conflict? The following is a personal and reflexive view, affected in some measure by oral transmissions received from institutional elders but based always on my own experience. When I was a child, my home was filled with music from all over the world, including many releases from Folkways Records. Individually and as a collection, the music opened windows of my imagination and initiated a sense of curiosity and wonder about the experience and perception of others. The material ignited a musical passion that has proved lasting. I have served as Assistant Director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings since 1998 and thus have had opportunity to live with the tensions of its "mission vs. operational needs" polarity, both to ask and try to answer the question on a daily basis. I offer this essay to readers in hopes that it may help demythologize and demystify the process whereby recordings of community-based traditions are promulgated from the setting of the United States national museum and into the increasingly globalized marketplace.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001 exacerbated an economic contraction already in progress in the U.S. and produced a precipitous drop in recording sales during that year's last few months. The North American music industry continued depressed in 2002, with sales down on average more than ten percent as compared to the prior year. Claims have been made in music industry press—ongoing and regular discussion in *Billboard* magazine, most notably—that the drop in sales was caused by low quality of content (an increase in music downloading, CD-burning, or piracy aside). However, although visits to the Smithsonian dwindled

by seventy percent and (according to internal assessment) sales in its shops remain depressed at this writing by more than twenty-five percent as compared to prior years, in 2002 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings had its second-best sales year ever.

For Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a nonprofit record label and audio recording archive, a tiny part of the national museum complex of the United States, the sad events and grim statistics of 2001 did sharpen focus on a persistent and ever-present challenge: how to fund operations by sales of recordings and by grants, and at the same time maintain content with a very high level of educational value and cultural significance?

The Smithsonian Institution and the Folkways Records Collection

The Smithsonian Institution was founded by an 1846 Act of Congress after a bequest from the estate of British scientist James Smithson intended to promote "the increase and diffusion of knowledge. . . ."[1] Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the Smithsonian comprises more than a dozen museums (with two new facilities currently under construction), an astrophysical observatory, an environmental research center, a tropical research center, and a zoo, among other units. It is also home to a recording archive and a record label, under the auspices of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The Center is also progenitor to Smithsonian Global Sound, a collaborative effort with some of the world's traditional music archives that aims to disseminate online their hitherto unavailable content. Beginning in 2003 with material from India and South Africa, Global Sound will make high quality audio recordings of traditional music downloadable from the Internet to libraries, schools and individuals *(www.globalsound.org).* But the Center's *piece de résistance* is the development and presentation of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival every summer on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

The Smithsonian started collecting audio recordings in a major way in 1987, with the acquisition of the 2000+ master recordings, as well as the production and business files of Folkways Records & Service Corporation, along with underlying contracts and associated

intellectual property rights. Folkways was founded by Moses Asch in New York City shortly after World War II. It pioneered—some even say launched—both the postwar folk revival and America's introduction to traditional musics of the world. As a whole it is an extraordinary aural document, eloquent testimony to the richness of human experience in sound—with music, spoken word, and natural and manufactured sounds among its offerings. Moses's son, Michael Asch, believes Folkways Records may have been his father's response to the Holocaust, its wide-ranging documentary efforts a deep affirmation of the intrinsic value of the entirety of human experience.[2] The Smithsonian gained the right to hold the collection because it was the only entity agreeable to the donor family's stipulation that each and every recording remain available to the public, just as Moses Asch had kept all titles in print. This was a requirement that no major label would agree to, because it makes no sense as a business proposition.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings: Its Mission and Strategy for Survival

Since the initial acquisition, the Smithsonian has acquired several other assemblages of master recordings, the contents of several hundred albums and related materials, almost all previously released by other small independent record labels. These comprise the Cook, Dyer-Bennet, Fast Folk, Monitor, and Paredon collections. The record label Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, as a "museum of sound,"[3] continues the Asch legacy in two principal ways. First, almost the entire archive's contents are available from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings' in-house mail order service in the form of digital copies of the original masters transferred to custom-manufactured CD-Rs or audio cassettes, then sent out accompanied by photocopies of the original LP liner notes. Second, the Smithsonian publishes recordings of music, spoken word and other sounds in the form of CDs, audio cassettes, LPs and digital downloads distributed in normal channels of retail commerce around the world. More than half of such publications to date have been based on material held in the archive collections.[4] The rest of the releases arise from collaborations, usually with invited individuals and mostly based on ideas that emerge from, or

at least are in alignment with, the strategies and mission of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

At the inception of the relationship with the Folkways Records Collection, the Smithsonian decreed that after disbursing a budget allotment sufficient to house and preserve the physical materials comprising the collection, no funding would be allocated for outreach or recording publication. The audio collection would have to earn (and has earned) its own operating revenues. It this way the enterprise resembles other recording companies.

But this stipulation precipitated an unusual creative tension. How could such an effort uphold Smithson's lofty mission to increase and diffuse knowledge through recorded sound, yet still pay its own way? Titles such as *Speech after Removal of the Larynx,* consisting entirely of human speech,[5] are not hit records, after all. It is a fundamental question, one which has been asked again and again and answered in interesting ways at different times during the last fifteen years or so. Answers are best seen when the entirety of the recordings released are considered together.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has published nearly 300 new releases (featuring remastered sound, new notes and packaging) since its inception, across a broad range of genres and artists including legendary American folk icons like Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger; children's music veteran Ella Jenkins; new music pioneer John Cage; and such contemporary luminaries as Lucinda Williams, Irish fiddler Kevin Burke, and bluesman Honeyboy Edwards. The label has been honored with multiple Grammy and other national and international awards. It has published multivolume cultural representations in sound, some with broad geographic scope. They include a twenty-disc Indonesian series *(Music of Indonesia),* eight volumes of Peruvian community-based traditions *(Traditional Music of Peru),* and a set of three CDs from a single community in Papua New Guinea *(Bosavi: Rainforest Music from Papua New Guinea),* as well as single discs from Mbuti Pygmies of the Ituri Rainforest, songs from Old Regular Baptists of the Indian Bottom Association, sounds of frogs, and recitations of poetry. Several titles of Latin and Latina/o American music series have been published recently with more to come, and an

Asian American music series is being contemplated, both in anticipation of demographic shifts in the U.S. population.

The overall process of selecting a year's releases is metaphorically somewhere between a choreographed dance and a game of dice. Sales and marketing experience have generally shown our staff that legendary American folk artists sell well for years while lesser-known traditional music, performers, or concepts seldom do. We have to issue some of the better-known material or we cannot afford to publish the rest. The commercial music business will almost never see fit to publish recordings that are unlikely to make a profit. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings does effective work in choosing and making marvelous but little-known recordings available. Without such releases, the educational mission would be ill served. With them, we enhance and enrich many lives and increase our collective repository of knowledge about humanity.

For Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a tremendous success is signaled by 10,000 copies sold, while 3,000-5,000 copies is noteworthy. Frequently, fewer than 500 copies of an album sell, even after years of availability. I read recently in *Billboard* magazine that in 2001 over 60,000 new releases entered U.S. retail distribution. A bare two percent of those sold 10,000 or more copies. But quantitative analysis tells us only how much money we have generated; it speaks little to the missions of the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings label and the Smithsonian Institution. And we can't perform these missions if we can't pay the staff or pay artists all the royalties and licensing obligations to which we committed ourselves.

Whenever possible, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings tries to locate financial collaborators as well, individuals or entities who are able to offer subvention assistance. If our efforts can find such support, they diminish the risks of issuing a publication known to have limited appeal in a broad and competitive marketplace. The direct costs of issuing a new release, including mastering, design, editing, layout, printing, packaging, and shipping are substantial. Add marketing expenses, and project costs can double. At US$14.00 or $15.00 for a single full-length CD, it is an interesting challenge to navigate a year that includes albums promising never to sell enough to pay for their direct costs, let alone associated overhead.

There are quantitative exceptions to how we conceive and schedule releases, and at neither extreme can exceptions be planned for, be they extraordinary successes or failures. For example, we try to avoid manufacturing more copies than we reasonably expect to sell in the first six months to a year after initial release. But there are economies of scale available in manufacturing larger quantities, so more might be better. Occasionally we underestimate and demand is higher than anticipated; by the time we re-manufacture the demand may be past. Occasionally we may overestimate; thus scarce capital may become tied up in inventory that sits in a warehouse and for which we pay storage fees every month. We occasionally have years' worth of inventory on a particular title so we may even pay to destroy overstock.

Perhaps the hundreds of pages of articles and reviews gathered each year about the work we do, or about individual releases, offer a valid qualitative perspective. Correspondence with scholars (such as folklorists, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists), aficionados, and fans around the world gives largely (but certainly not exclusively) positive feedback about quality.

Unsolicited project proposals pour in from all over the world. Ideas are sometimes introduced or offered directly by colleagues from the international community of scholars, or generated in-house by staff of the Center. A mock-up of the sound may be invited; how it sounds always starts the process. Often proposals or even completed projects may be received from Smithsonian Folklife Festival program curators. Sometimes other units of the Smithsonian come to us: witness a recent Latin jazz compilation (*Latin Jazz: La Combinación Perfecta,* 2002) curated for Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), or several albums of material released in collaboration with the National Museum of the American Indian (e.g., *Creation's Journey: Native American Music,* 1994 or *Wood that Sings: Indian Fiddle Music of the Americas,* 1997). The collaborative process with artists, compilers, producers and noteswriters is the core of our work.

If an incoming proposal meets strategic goals but there is insufficient knowledge in-house to be entirely confident of our assessment, both audio and notes are sent out to expert reviewers for assessment as to quality and significance of the material. In addition, core staff members gather regularly throughout the year to discuss and develop ideas based on the

archive collection. Our staff works closely with compilers, from initial concept to publication, a time-consuming effort that we believe is critical to accomplishing the mission of the Smithsonian.

So goes the dance and the gamble of those who work for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a dedicated staff of about seventeen professionals who work full time, aided immeasurably by volunteers and interns throughout the year. The collection is a treasure for our generation and will be there for generations to come. As it has done in the past, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings will continue to negotiate technology shifts, including movement away from today's ubiquitous audio compact disc and toward all-digital online download and emergent delivery means. There are, of course, additional issues that are of interest to potential collaborators. Over the next few years, our professional staff will attempt to identify these issues, disseminate information about them, and initiate public discussion. In the meantime, we continue the delicate process of trying to balance the philanthropic mandates of James Smithson and Moses Asch with commercial realities.

Notes

1. "I then bequeath the whole of my property . . . to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men" (extract from the Last Will and Testament of English scientist James Smithson [d. 1829] in Smithsonian Directive 150: Smithsonian Institution Origins, Governance, and Relationship to the Federal Government [April 16, 1996]).

2. From conversations with Professor Michael Asch, who has served as Chair of the Folkways Advisory Board since the collection arrived at the Smithsonian. Asch is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta and Visiting Professor in Anthropology at the University of Victoria.

3. The concept of a "museum of sound" is believed to have been first articulated by Professor Anthony Seeger, founding director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and curator of the Folkways Collection until 2000. Dr. Daniel Sheehy succeeded Seeger as director and curator in October 2000.

4. Knowledge gained since the Smithsonian's acquisition has led to restrictions of availability for materials considered misappropriated or even stolen by today's legal standards, a tiny percentage of the collection. The issue of changing ideas of intellectual property since the mid twentieth century is outside the scope of this writing.

5. The 1964 recording, one of a Folkways "Science on Records" series, presents examples of ingenious ways people have learned to physiologically or electromechanically reproduce speech after the removal of their primary sound-producing organ. FX-6134 has sold fewer than ten copies since the collection's arrival the Smithsonian.